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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of instruction in meaningful units on the comprehension and fluency of poor readers in the fourth grade. Subjects were five fourth-grade students in a northeast Georgia school classified as poor readers. Method of instruction included modeling smooth reading with appropriate junctures and good intonation. The instructional phase was divided into three stages: (1) worksheets were already segmented at the punctuation marks; (2) students were required to do their own segmenting before modeling instruction began; and (3) written segmenting was phased out while the modeled reading continued. Students were tested on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) before and after the study and evaluated on different forms of Reading Miscue Inventory three times during the study. Results indicated that students showed an increase in words per juncture, a decrease in the total number of miscues per hundred in four out of five cases, an increase in percentile ranks on the ITBS with the exception of one student, decline in the words read per juncture in four of the five students, and maintenance of retelling scores in four of the five students. Comments requested at the end of the instructional segment of the study showed students enjoyed the instruction and recognized the need to focus on more individual words in reading. Students saw reading as meaningful, and read orally much more smoothly than before the study. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (MG)

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CAN READERS RELY TOO MUCH ON THE PRINTED PAGE?

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ASSISTED REPEATED READING MODEL

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This study was conducted to examine the effects of instruction in meaningful units on the comprehension and fluency of poor readers in the fourth grade.

CAN READERS RELY TOO MUCH ON THE PRINTED PAGE?

With a brand new masters degree in teaching of reading I went to interview for placement in an elementary school in a rural community of Northeast Georgia. I told the principal I would like to teach the slowest readers.

"No one will fight you for them," was his reply.

According to my definition a poor reader is one who scores below the 50th percentile on achievement testing. My fourth grade class fit my definition of poor readers. When I looked closer, I found that the students were not using all three cue systems--semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic--in whole language processing. While the students showed almost no weaknesses in word analysis, their knowledge of the spoken language did not connect with reading. They did not use their background knowledge. Analyzing the words individually was not as difficult for these students as telling what had been read. On the Reading Miscue Inventory (RMI), students' miscues tended to be grapho-phonically similar to the word from the text. For example, a student's mistake might be reading "horse" for "house." Horse

would not make sense in place of house, and would cause a loss of meaning. According to the RMI, 75% of the class had at least 40% miscues causing loss of meaning. Half of the class had retelling scores measuring comprehension below 40%. These readers were relying too much on the printed page in front of them and not enough on syntactic and semantic cues to meaning.

What I found was that these students saw reading not as natural language, nor as communication, but as individual words to call out perfectly so that understanding would come magically at the end. Several characteristics were typical of oral reading behavior of these students: (1) the students were so concerned with reading accurately that they produced non-words which looked and sounded like the actual text but made no sense; (2) the students made few attempts to correct errors; (3) they paused between words where no pause was necessary; and (4) they read with sing-song intonation or in a monotone. These four characteristics of the students' reading were evidence that the students were not monitoring their reading for comprehension. These students were depending too much on the printed page.

Problem: Overuse of the Printed Page

In focusing on the print, my students were not reading for meaning. In taped interviews the students described previous instruction as traditional basal instruction with emphasis on phonics and discrete skill. Their reports of classroom instruction indicated a pattern of overcorrection of miscues by the teacher, focus on phonic analysis and workbook lessons, and very little real reading practice. Allington (1980), Boodt (1984), and Fleisher (1988) have found this same pattern of instruction in poor readers' classrooms. Previous classroom instruction had given my students no chance to overcome their pattern of word-by-word reading which is typical of poor readers (O'Shea and Sindelar, 1983; Fleisher, 1988), but instead they continued to rely on graphic cues. Beginning readers typically read in a word-by-word manner but these students could not make the transition to reading for comprehension. An evaluation of their permanent records showed that word attack had not previously been a problem with these students. One case study student, Matt, illustrates the pattern: in first grade, where only 10% of the basal reading skills test dealt with comprehension, he scored 91% on the overall test. In second

grade, only decoding skills were tested. He scored 80%. The other sections dealing with comprehension skills, reference and study skills, were not reported. Although records seemed to indicate that Matt was a successful reader, he was really only successful in phonics, not in reading.

Ben, Cindy, and Susan all followed a similar pattern; when they began first grade all three were successful with phonics, but were not successful on comprehension section of the reading tests. Although Rob's overall scores were above 90% from first grade through the last part of second, he failed comprehension sections even in the first grade. More emphasis is placed on comprehension at higher levels of the basal reading skills test,and these four students who had been analyzing words carefully could not keep up.

In a taped interview, Matt recalled his previous instruction. His explanation of why he was so far behind in reading had to do with his first grade experience. He said that he and three other students had to "stay back in a first grade book and do that book over." In second grade, his most vivid memory was learning words to say to the teacher the next day, "but if we didn't say all the words we would have to do it again." In third grade, "She made us do workbooks most of the time and we read once a week." If what the student remembered was what was done most often, then these teachers were focusing on word analysis and skills in workbooks and little time was

given to actual reading. Allington (1980) and Gambrell, Wilson and Gantt (1981) as well as Collins (1982) have found instruction for poor readers to be very structured, emphasizing phonic analysis, treating errors out of context, and focusing on single words instead of meaningful units.

Research had made recommendations for a class of poor readers like mine, and I wanted to combine some of these ideas. I needed a way to help students make efficient use of print (Goodman, 1968; Samuels, 1988) and focus on the knowledge of the language (Furniss and Graves,1980; Burke, 1976) and background experience (Hansen and Hubbard, 1984; Martinez, 1983; Holmes, 1983). The students also needed repeated practice in context (Sachs, 1984; Dowhower, 1987) with enough support for them to become fluent (Koskinen and Blum, 1986) to break the patterns of their past reading and learn strategies which would help them focus on reading for meaning (Johnson, 1983; Olshavsky 1977).

One Solution: Segmenting Text

Smooth oral reading is an indication of a focus on comprehension, and several reading techniques have been shown to encourage this (Allington, 1977; Kann, 1983; Rashotte and Torgesen, 1985). Text segmenting, or organizing material into meaningful phrases for students, has been found to improve the comprehension of poor readers (O'Shea and Sindelar, 1983; Weiss, 1983) and increase the number of words read between pauses

(Imlach and Clay, 1982) so that poor readers become more fluent. Rasinski (1989) recommends combining various techniques for fluency instruction.

I began using this method of instruction in an attempt to improve the comprehension of my poor readers and make their reading smoother and their phrasing more natural. An informal inquiry that year revealed that the oral reading process with segmented text was successful. Improvement in words read between junctures,however, was not documented in a manner specific enough to measure.

Purpose of the Study

Based on the positive results of the initial investigation, I conducted a study to examine whether a specific program of instruction in teacher modeling and practice of junctures in modeled text would improve the comprehension and smoothness of reading of poor readers in the fourth grade. I investigated the following questions:

1. Would instruction in meaningful units of language increase words read between junctures?
2. Would instruction in appropriate junctures improve miscue correction?
3. Would instruction in appropriate juncture improve comprehension?
4. Would ability to use appropriate juncture be maintained following six weeks with no specific instruction in meaningful units?

Sample

The school, one of five elementary schools in a small but highly industrialized county in Northeast Georgia, had an enrollment of approximately 500 of the 4100 students in the county. In the school system, non-white students comprised 24%; in the elementary school of this study there were 20% non-white students. Seventy-five percent of the children enrolled at the time of the study had attended this school during their entire school life. The families fit into the lower middle income range.

In this elementary school fourth, fifth, and sixth grades used the first hour of the day for reading with cross-grade grouping. Students were assigned to classes according to placement in the basal reading series. The class in which I conducted this research was the lowest group of readers, comprised mainly of fourth-grade students reading at approximately third-grade level. The students were reading one year behind average students at their grade level according to the basal testing program, and were identified by the county as needing remediation in reading. Fifth- and sixth-grade students who were reading at approximately third grade level were also placed in this class. All students in the class received the same instruction, but the five students selected for the case studies were fourth-graders classified as poor readers based on two criteria. They must have scored below the 50th percentile on

the Science Research Associates Achievement Series (SRA) administered in September of that year, and must have read an average of 3 or fewer words per juncture on a passage of 250 words. The average of 3 words per juncture was used based on findings of Imlach and Clay (1982) that the lower 50% of the reading group, the poor readers, averaged no more than 3.0 words per juncture.

I chose five students for case studies from a possible group of 20 students who fit the criteria. The case study students included four boys and one girl, three of whom were white and two of whom were non-white students. Three of the five case study students qualified for the federal government free/reduced lunch program. All students in the class were included in the instructional program and in the group testing, but for analysis of group scores only fourth-graders were included.

Method of Instruction

At the beginning of each segmented modeling lesson, the class discussed concepts and recalled background experiences. I stated plainly my goal for them as readers--understanding of the ideas they were reading. Then I read one paragraph at a time, modeling smooth reading with appropriate junctures and good intonation. Students followed along, pointing to the words with their fingers or with a pencil. The finger-pointing was my assurance that the students were looking at the story, not just

memorizing what they were listening to. Then the students read aloud along with me. I modeled the subsequent paragraphs and then all read chorally until the story was finished. Then the whole class read again or individual students took turns reading the story straight through from beginning to end. After the oral reading, students wrote answers to literal recall and inferential questions as well as to simple vocabulary building questions.

The instructional phase of the study was divided into three stages. In the first stage, material was segmented prior to modeling instruction. The worksheets were already marked with slashes at the punctuation marks when I handed them to the students. A sample of the segmenting is shown below:

> In Washington, D.C.,/ there is a strange-
> looking machine with eight legs./ It is used
> to test shoes and to show how long they wear./
> A new shoe is placed on each leg of the ma-
> chine./ As the machine turns round and round,/
> each shoe hits the floor just as if a person
> were walking in it./ The shoe-testing machine
> steps off thousands of miles./ It shows that
> shoes made now wear twice as long as those
> made when your father and mother were children./

In the second stage, I asked the students to do their own segmenting before modeling instruction began. They inserted slash marks as they saw a need for them. As I modeled I circulated around the room checking the accuracy of their segmenting. Some students made corrections as they listened to me read orally and heard me pause. During the third stage, written segmenting was phased out while the modeled reading continued.

Daily fifteen minute sessions were conducted for a five month period. Material selected for use was chosen because the worksheets contained stories short enough to complete in a fifteen minute time period and long enough to include some comprehension analysis.

Evaluation

All students were tested on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills before and after the study. Five students were selected for case study. These students were evaluated on different forms of Reading Miscue Inventory (RMI) three times during the study. During the oral portion of the lesson, written records were kept of the miscues and junctures of case study students. The recording was done easily by writing directly only a printed copy of what the students were reading. I wrote the name of the student whose reading was being analyzed outside the paragraph he or she read, and marked the paragraph with the slash marks for pauses. I marked miscues according to the guidelines of the RMI.

These pages formed a journal of the daily progress made by each of the five students.

I interrupted students' oral reading only when the miscue caused a meaning loss. Then I said,"Are you sure that made sense? Go back to the beginning of the sentence." Again, the focus was on comprehension.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to examine whether the comprehension and smoothness of reading of poor readers in the fourth grade could be improved through instruction in meaningful units. Evaluation was based on teacher observation as well as results on Reading Miscue Inventory and Iowas Test of Basic Skills. Data are presented here according to each question.

1. Was instruction in meaningful units related to an increase in words read between junctures?

The five students who were evaluated intensively through case study analysis were tested in two ways on the basis of words per juncture. Approximately every seven to ten days, a record was made of words read per juncture using the instructional material immediately following the modeling instruction. The record was kept in diary form marked on one of the worksheets like the ones the students were using. An example of a diary page is shown below.

Date: 2/7 Matt

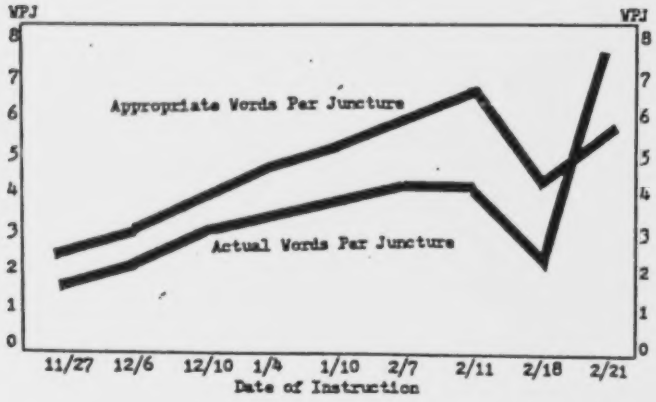
In Washington, D.C., / there is a strange-looking machine with eight legs. / It is used to test shoes and to show how long they wear. / A new shoe is placed / on each leg / of the ma- / 7.72 wpj

chine./ As the machine turns round and round,/ 14 7.72
each shoe hits the floor/just as if a person
were walking on it./ The shoe-testing machine 11 ⟌85 words
steps off thousands of miles./ It shows that junctures
shoes made now wear/twice as long as those
made when your father/and mother were children./

Graph 1 shows the progress made by an individual student in words per juncture immediately following instruction. The students were rereading the same material they had just heard modeled and read chorally.

GRAPH 1

Words Per Juncture Immediately Following Instruction
Case Study II - Student RS

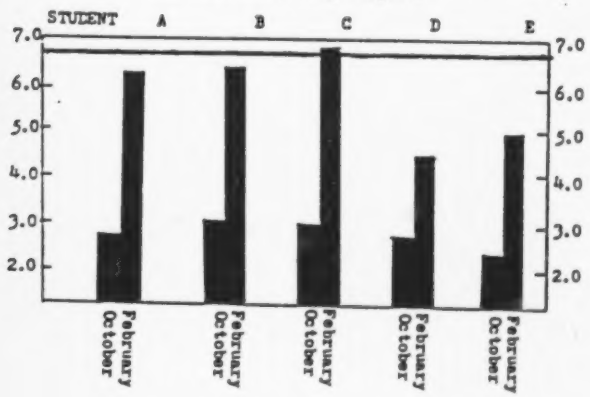


A second evaluation was made using the Reading Miscue Inventory. I analyzed passages to determine how many words per juncture were appropriate to the passage (as signaled by punctuation) and how many words per juncture were read by the student. Passages to be analyzed were taken from the RMI

starting at least 250 words into the selection with 250 to 300 words to be analyzed in each passage. Evaluation was done in this way to ensure the smoothest reading of which the student was capable. Graph 2 compares pretest scores and posttest scores.

GRAPH 2

Words Per Juncture Scores On Reading Miscue Inventory for Five Case Study Subjects



Those students who received instruction in meaningful units did show an increase in words per juncture.

2. Did instruction in appropriate juncture improve miscue correction?

Miscue correction improvement was evaluated on 250 to 300 word segments of the passages on Reading Miscue Inventory. Table 1 shows total miscues per hundred words regardless of the effect of the miscues on meaning. Miscues were analyzed and listed as

causing loss of meaning or causing no loss. Table 2 shows the results.

TABLE 1

Total Miscues per Hundred Words on Reading Miscue Inventory
For Five Case Study Subjects

Students	Pretest October	Posttest February	Difference
A	7.6	8.0	.4 more
B	8.0	3.0	5.0 fewer
C	6.0	3.3	2.7 fewer
D	9.2	4.6	4.6 fewer
E	19.2	12.0	7.2 fewer

TABLE 2

Miscues Causing Meaning Loss Per Hundred Words
On Reading Miscue Inventory
For five Case Study Subjects

Students	Pretest October	Posttest February	Difference
A	3.2	4.7	1.5 more
B	4.4	1.6	2.8 fewer
C	1.2	1.6	.4 more
D	3.6	2.0	1.6 fewer
E	14.0	9.7	4.3 fewer

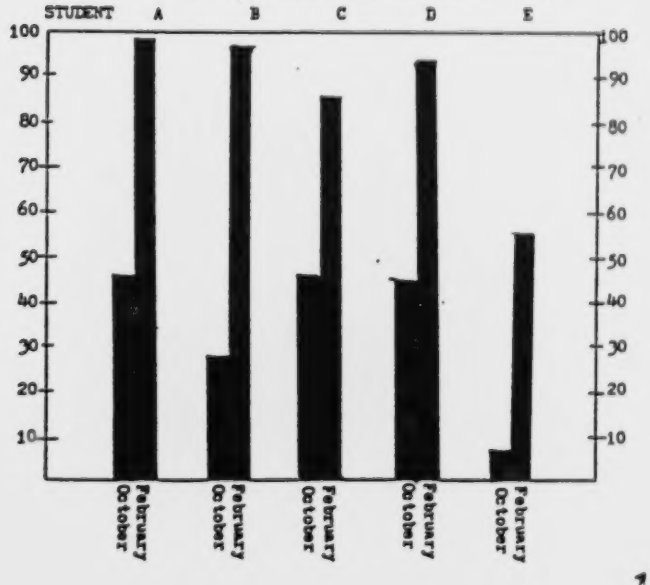
An analysis of the data of miscue correction shows a decrease in the total number of miscues per hundred in 4 out of 5 cases. Three of the five students also showed a decrease in the miscues causing loss per hundred words. Results were mixed but did tend to support the relationship between instruction in meaningful units and improvement in miscue correction.

3. Did instruction in appropriate juncture improve comprehension?

Comprehension was measured by the Reading Comprehension section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Retelling score on the Reading Miscue Inventory. Graph 3 shows results on Retelling scores. Graph 4 shows results of comprehension scores on Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

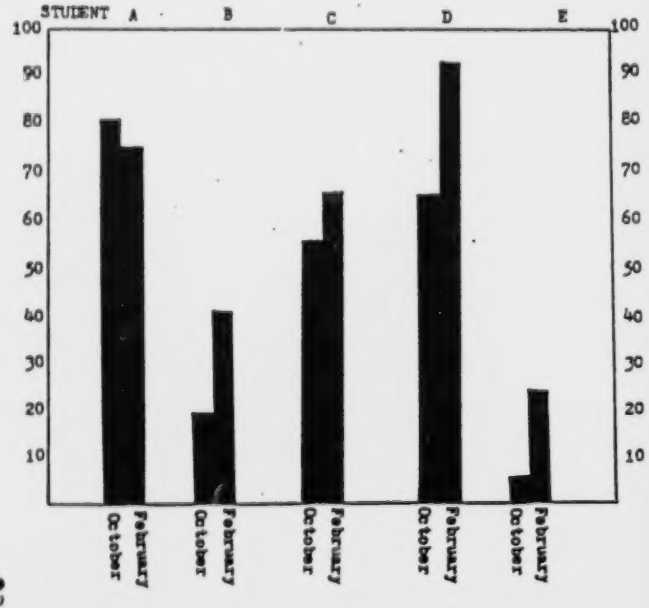
GRAPH 3

Reading Miscue Inventory Retelling Score
For Five Case Study Subjects



GRAPH 4

Iowa Test of Basic Skills Comprehension Scores
For Five Case Study Subjects in Percentile Ranks



Matt was the only case study student whose percentile rank on the ITBS decreased from October to February. The decrease was only 5 percentage points, from 80 to 75, but the drop was surprising given the excellent retelling scores recorded just a couple of days prior to the ITBS testing date. Shortly after testing was completed, Matt mentioned that his mother was going into the hospital. He was very upset, and it is likely that his score was affected by this knowledge.

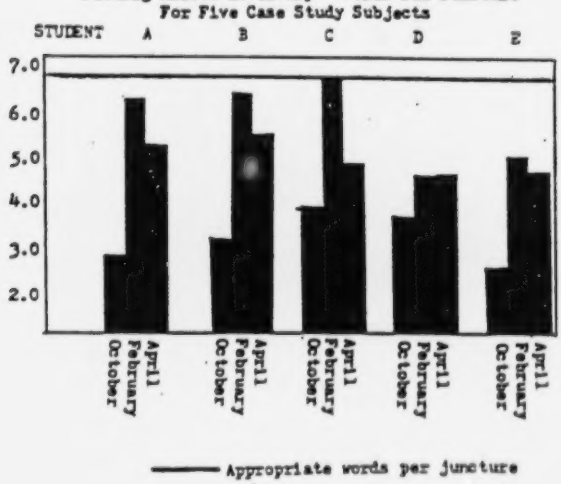
In addition to the data for the five case studies, data for 16 of the 20 total class members were collected for the ITBS. (Four of the students who were pretested had moved prior to posttesting.) Fourteen of the sixteen made an improvement in percentile rank in comprehension. The average of the class percentile rank was 34% at the beginning of the study, and 54% at the end of the study. Both the ITBS and the RMI scores indicate that instruction in appropriate juncture will improve comprehension.

4. Was ability to use appropriate juncture maintained following a six-week period of no specific instruction in meaningful units?

A final RMI was given in April following a six-week period of no instruction in meaningful units to test whether improvement in words per juncture would be maintained without instruction. The results are reported in words per juncture and retelling scores.

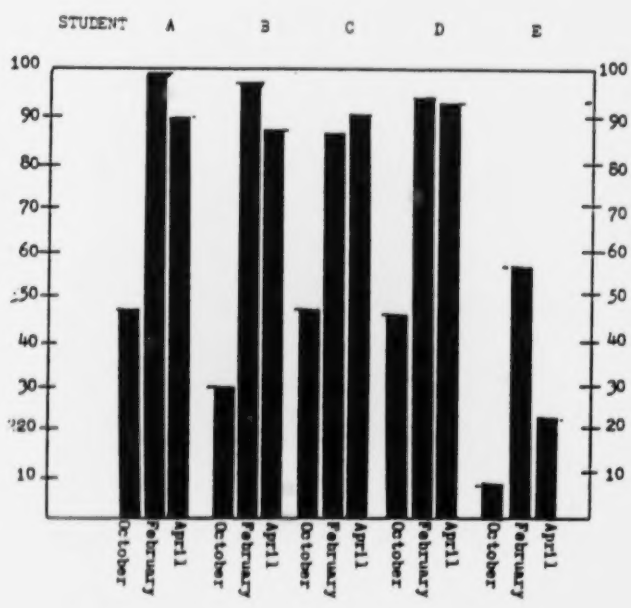
GRAPH 5

Reading Miscue Inventory - Words Per Juncture
For Five Case Study Subjects



GRAPH 6

Reading Miscue Inventory Retelling Score
For Five Case Study Subjects



There were declines in the words read per juncture in four of the five case study students, but scores were still much higher than at the beginning of the study. Retelling scores were maintained in four of the five case study students.

Case Study Students

The daily journal and the Reading Miscue Inventories allowed for progress to be seen all through the study. In October Cindy read in a very monotonous manner, calling nonsense words and going on. She did not expect reading to be sensible. She had the lowest scores of any of the case study students. In October, she called nonsense words which looked and sounded like the appropriate word. Six weeks later in November, she felt skipping unknown words was more effective. I knew in January when Cindy made her first synonym miscue that she was interacting with the text. In Mid-February she finally began to make regressions to correct miscues, when previously she had simply ignored them. Her comments at the end of the study indicated that she looked at reading differently: "When I read now I think about some questions and I can know about the story and remember it in my mind without looking back." About one particular story, Cindy stated,"I knew a lot about dinosaurs before I read this." About another, she said,"I learned about magic. I didn't even know nothing about magic!" Cindy had learned to access prior knowledge when it was there and that sometimes she read to learn something new.

Susan read in a monotone with a drawl. Her phonic analysis and grammatical understanding were good but she would become

confused about details of the story. In November, after reading half of a page of the story, she suddenly exclaimed,"It's about a dog!" At the end of the study, she noted,"I learned about stuff I didn't know. I read better when we were reading together."

Ben had a habit of regressing like stuttering. He did not seem to be anticipating a difficult word, but simply repeating. He read in a monotone with frequent pauses, nonsense substitutions and repetitions. In the first six weeks, Ben had made noticeable progress with the regression problem, but by February that problem had almost ceased to exist. On the February RMI he regressed to correct intonation and juncture in three places indicating an understanding of the syntactic cues he had missed. His self-esteem improved as he became a risk-taker. During the final RMI, twice Ben read entire sentences which were worded differently than the text, but which kept the author's meaning. When questioned about these sentences, his response was,"Well, I knew what it said, but I had trouble with a couple of the words, so I just said what it meant."

Rob read with sing-song intonation on his first RMI; while his word-calling ability was 92% accurate (based on miscues per hundred), his retelling score was only 28%. By December, his retelling score went to 85%. It was interesting to watch the self-esteem levels of these students rise as their reading

ability improved. Matt, like some of the other, showed after about six weeks that he was not really a slow learner. He was just behind in the basal series. As the study went on Matt's improvement in school was expressed in ways other than just academic. He began to make more friends. He also began volunteering enthusiastically to read aloud in class. The books he chose to read were longer, and he talked more about them.

As I summarized the progress of the students on the basis of testing and daily journal entries, patterns began to emerge. The students chose to read longer books, read for enjoyment, and improved in areas of self-concept and attitude toward school.

Comments requested at the end of the instructional segment of the study showed students enjoyed the instruction and recognized the need to focus on more than individual words in reading. Students saw reading as meaningful, and read orally much more smoothly. Reading was more enjoyable for them than before the study.

Practical Implications

The following are ideas which may be useful for improving reading instruction for poor readers, regardless of the grade level:

1. Poor readers need to learn that reading is meaningful. Focus on meaning instead of correcting every mistake.
2. Poor readers need to be helped to read smoothly. Reading should be taught at a level that is easy enough

to develop fluency.

3. Reading should sound like natural language, with appropriate stress, intonation and juncture. Reading aloud with students will encourage smooth natural reading.
4. Punctuation should be pointed out so students will know it marks places appropriate for pausing when reading. Students need to see that words between punctuation marks form a a meaningful unit.
5. The modeling method presented in this study could also be used with subject area textbooks when the vocabulary is difficult for the students while the concepts are within their range. Having heard the material read to them, the students have no problems with the individual words, and are free to deal with the content.

Reading must always involve a focus on meaning. When students reach upper elementary grades still pausing too often in their reading, and comprehending poorly, some method must be used to help them read in a smooth, natural way. The method presented in this research centers on smoothing out the reading process in an attempt to make reading more like natural language.

The problem of word-by-word reading is typical for the first stages of reading. With a focus on smoothness and reading for meaning, the problem could be alleviated early. Teaching that

focuses on word-perfect reading or emphasizes phonics in isolation pushes students into a pattern of word-calling. On the other hand, teaching that makes use of whole language and uses strategies drawing on all three cue systems of language can prevent word-calling from becoming a problem.

Teachers should be aware of differing patterns of instruction with good and poor readers. If the method is appropriate for good readers, it should also be used for poor readers. Poor readers need more whole languge processing than the research indicates they are receiving. Allington (1977) found poor readers were not reading as much as good readers. One of the most rewarding comments made to me by Matt was,"You helped me by letting me read by myself." Poor readers need to practice real reading just as much as good readers do. They need to focus on reading for meaning and making inferences from their reading as well as tying new ideas in their reading to background knowledge. More oral practice is needed, not for word accuracy but for smoothness, fluency, and natural phrasing. Using these ideas in teaching can help poor readers read more like proficient ones. Modeling instruction of this type can be included as part of any reading program.

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